



# Bardiya and Gaumāta: An Achaemenid Enigma Reconsidered

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most debated episodes of early Achaemenid history concerns the events that took place in 522–521 B.C.E. during the few months immediately following the death of King Cambyses and preceding the rise to power of Darius I. During this brief period, the Achaemenid throne was held/seized by one or several individual(s), about whose identity our sources provide conflicting information. Thus, discord exists not only with respect to: (1) the nature of the succession itself; but also (2) the identity of the successor/usurper; (3) the number of “usurpers”; (4) as well as the motives and nature of Darius’ own rise to power.

Scholarship in this field has been divided into two opposed camps. One represents those who defend the *hypothesis of the false-Bardiya* and accept the tenor of Darius’ inscription at Bisitun, in which the magus Gaumāta is depicted as an usurper who seized power by pretending to be Bardiya, the son of Cyrus the Great and brother of Cambyses II. The other camp consists of those who subscribe to the *hypothesis of the true-Bardiya*, and therefore reject the credibility of Darius’ *res gestae*, for they perceive it as a propagandistic narrative destined to cover Darius’ own coup d’état against the legitimate Bardiya, for the concealment of whose rule the presumed fiction of an usurper-magus was invented.<sup>1</sup>

This article seeks to reconcile these two opposing views not only by inferring that both Bardiya and Gaumāta may have existed but also by arguing that the accounts pertaining to these personalities have undergone radically opposite alterations by being exposed to distinct historical and literary traditions. On the one hand,

within the discourse of the Bisitun inscription, the historical reality of *two protagonists* transmuted into the presence of a single ruler, unfit to rule, that is, Gaumāta pretending to be Bardiya. On the other hand, in the accounts of Hellanicus of Lesbos, Herodotus, and Pompeius Trogus/Justin, the rule of *two associates* became that of *two brothers*. Supposing for now that one may substantiate the assumption that *two associates* held the power before the rise of Darius, one still would need to explain not only *why* these associates were reduced to one in the Bisitun inscription, or made into two brothers in the accounts of Greek authors, but, more importantly, *how* these processes were carried out, that is, what were the historical precedents or literary patterns that could have served as models in the composition of these diverging accounts and, moreover, exhibited such pertinence to people’s mental attitudes as to render these stories plausible to their audiences.

Thus, this treatise *first* investigates the identity and the number of the rulers who fell prey to Darius’ coup d’état; *second*, it will argue that the artifice of *reduction to one* in the Bisitun inscription is tributary to the concept of the “substitute king” in Mesopotamia; and, *finally*, it will illustrate how the concept of twins in the Zoroastrian myth of creation could have caused the mutation of two associates into two *evil* brothers.

## 2. The Identity and Number of the “Usurpers”

The Bisitun inscription reports that King Cambyses had killed his brother Bardiya on the eve

of his Egyptian campaign without the people (*kāra*-) being informed of it. During Cambyses' absence in Egypt, a *magus* called Gaumāta usurped the power by calling himself Bardiya. As a result of the *magus*' claim the people became rebellious and went over from Cambyses to Gaumāta, who finally took possession of the Empire (*xšaçaṃ hauv aqarbāyatā*). No one contested Gaumāta's seizure of power.<sup>2</sup>

Our major classical sources, namely Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus/Justin, respectively ascribe to two *magi* the usurpation of Cambyses' throne. In Herodotus, they are called Smerdis and Patizeithēs,<sup>3</sup> whereas Justin calls them Cometes and Oropastes.<sup>4</sup> The story pattern, as well as the functions of the *magian* brothers, are almost identical in both accounts: within each *magian* couple, there is one crown-bestower, Patizeithēs in Herodotus, Oropastes in Justin; and one puppet-king, Smerdis and Mergis respectively, who, due to their physical resemblance to Bardiya, could be substituted, through the subterfuge of Patizeithēs or his Justinian counterpart Oropastes, for the defunct prince without the knowledge of the people and hence usurp the throne.

The usurper's duplication in Greek sources, in contrast to Bisitun's single "usurper," is commonly believed to derive from the erroneous interpretation of Gaumāta's titles as appellations of secondary persons.<sup>5</sup> The names of the couple transmitted by Herodotus, namely, Patizeithēs and Smerdis, could be respectively interpreted as Graecized renderings of the Old Persian title *\*pati-xšāyaθiya*- meaning "vice-roy," a reference to Patizeithēs' reported function as τῶν οἰκίῳν μελεδωνός "head of the royal household,"<sup>6</sup> and ἐπίτροπος τῶν οἰκίῳν "overseer of the royal household,"<sup>7</sup> as well as Smerdis < *\*Bardiya*-, which could have simply represented the name under which Gaumāta laid claim to the throne.

In analogy to the two *magi* in Herodotus' account, Justin's couple, Cometes and Oropastes, also might have emerged following a confusion similar to the one observed in Herodotus' narrative: Cometes undoubtedly refers to the name of Gaumāta; and Oropastes, possibly derived from another Old Persian title *\*ahura-upasta*- with the meaning of "who has Ahura's support,"<sup>8</sup> could have represented the religious epithet of the *magus* Gaumāta.

Therefore, it is assumed that the main sources of Herodotus and Justin had harmonized differ-

ent traditions, in which the *magus*' name and titles were variously recorded, interpreting his political and religious appellations as designations of a second protagonist.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of their ingenuity, however, these interpretations make certain assumptions that may not be substantiated:

(1) *First*, it is doubtful that the regency could have been entrusted to a *magus*, for one of its purposes was to assure the eventual accession of a legitimate successor should the king not survive an imperial campaign.<sup>10</sup> The regent therefore ought to have been himself of royal seed to assume sovereign power following the demise of the legitimate king. It is indeed highly improbable that Gaumāta, a representative of the priesthood, could have ever assumed a delegated power that could have been transmuted at any time into regal power.

(2) *Second*, the assassination of an imperial prince could not have remained unknown to the people; at least, his absence from the imperial campaign would have been noticed, for the utmost representatives of the royal family were bound to participate in the war effort. Unless a *raison d'état* were to hinder Prince Bardiya from fulfilling his nobiliary duties and to excuse his absence from the battlefield, Bardiya could not have remained in Persis during an imperial campaign to be conveniently murdered and substituted for in a manner concealed to the people in arms. Thus, the only excuse for Bardiya's absence in Egypt must have been the burden of the regency, aside from which only his death could have exempted him from the Egyptian campaign. However, the latter possibility must be rejected, for it would have meant that the prince's death was well known within the empire and that consequently Gaumāta could not have claimed the throne by assuming his identity.

(3) *Third*, the substitution of *Gaumāta* for Bardiya could not have been kept secret, even though the classical sources in their wisdom go through a great deal of trouble to find an artifice and subterfuge apt to explain this secrecy.

The reconstruction, therefore, will aim at addressing these shortcomings as follows:

(1) Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus represent two independent literary traditions that recognized two "usurpers."

(2) In Herodotus' account the "usurpers" are called Patizeithēs and Smerdis. Smerdis represents a Graecized form of the name Bardiya,

and Patizeithēs might refer to the political title *\*pati-xšāyaθiya-* that one may assume belonged to the imperial prince himself. Therefore, Smerdis might have been an appellation for Bardiya, in the same way as Patizeithēs was the prince's political title as regent. In light of this evidence, it appears at first glance that the duplication of the protagonist in Herodotus' tale is due to the fact that he, or his sources, did not recognize patizeithēs < *\*pati-xšāyaθiya-* as Bardiya's political designation and created a second protagonist to bear the title; should one, therefore, assume that Bardiya was the only "usurper" since Herodotus has transmitted his name and title?

(3) The evidence in Trogus'/Justin's account does not permit such a conclusion. The name Cometes designates Gaumāta, and Oropastes < *\*ahura-upasta-* indubitably represents a religious title belonging to the *magus*. Therefore, were one to apply the same procedure which identified the transmitted names in Herodotus' account as belonging to a single protagonist, namely, Bardiya, to the names communicated by Trogus, one would obtain not the personage of Bardiya but that of Gaumāta. Pompeius Trogus or his *Gewährsmann* may have committed the same error as Herodotus, but this time with the *magus'* name and title. Indeed, Pompeius Trogus' sources may not have realized that Oropastes < *\*ahura-upasta-* was indeed the religious epithet of Gaumāta and therefore may have forged a second protagonist.

(4) Although Herodotus' and Pompeius Trogus' accounts, taken separately, unveil a different "usurper," Bardiya in Herodotus, and Gaumāta in Justin, the combined evidence of the two sources, however, would suggest the involvement of both Bardiya and Gaumāta in the historical events of 522–521 B.C.E. The eventual implication of two protagonists was first deduced from the duplication of the "usurper" in the accounts of Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus. This duplication was subsequently explained as the result of an erroneous interpretation of titles as designations of second protagonists. This explanation, however, takes only the transmitted names into account without paying attention to the functions attributed to the *magi*. Each *magus* within his respective couple distinguishes himself from the other by a specific function. Thus, Patizeithēs and Cometes are depicted as *kingmakers*, in contrast to Smerdis and Bardiya, who are *puppet-kings*. The clear distinction be-

tween their respective functions makes it less probable that the "usurper's" duplication was occasioned only by the false interpretation of names. On the one hand, it seems certain that the names Patizeithēs and Oropastes represented the respective titles and epithets of Bardiya and Gaumāta and are therefore not appellations of secondary protagonists; on the other hand, the bipartition of functions within either couple forbids the reduction of two personae into one. This dilemma can only be solved as follows:

(a) The testimonies of Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus, ascribing to two protagonists the "usurpation" of Cambyzes' throne, may be a reflection of the historicity of both Bardiya and Gaumāta, suggested by the extraction of two different personages from the records of Herodotus and Pompeius Trogus, as well as the duality of functions within each couple.

(b) It is therefore probable that although in Herodotus' time, the memory of two "usurpers" still persisted, which is testified in his work by the duality of the *magi's* functions, Herodotus nevertheless collected the name and the title of only *one* of the "usurpers," namely Bardiya and his political title *\*pati-xšāyaθiya-*. His sole mistake consisted in the erroneous attribution of Bardiya's political designation to the second protagonist.

(c) In analogy to Herodotus, Pompeius Trogus' sources also must have kept the memory of two "usurpers." But, instead of Bardiya's name and title, Trogus collected Gaumāta's name and religious title, Cometes and Oropastes < *\*ahura-upasta-*. He then falsely ascribed Gaumāta's epithet to the second protagonist.

### 3. The Concept and Reality of the "Substitute King"

Having made a case for the historicity of both Bardiya and Gaumāta, there remains the necessity of revealing the historical precedents, or literary patterns, upon which Darius' fabricated chronicle rested. The main component of Darius' story resides in the successful substitution of Prince Bardiya by Gaumāta, a theme that to my knowledge is not to be found in the Iranian epic tradition. However, the concept and ritual of the surrogate king is well attested in Mesopotamia and Anatolia, and especially in the Late

Assyrian empire.<sup>11</sup> The principles of the surrogate kingship, as exercised in the Late Assyrian Empire, are simple: at times, where the life of the rightful sovereign was deemed to be threatened by an evil omen, especially eclipses, a surrogate king (*šar pūḫi*), mostly an individual of no social consequence (*saklu*), a prisoner, criminal, or opponent (*dābibu*)<sup>12</sup> could be chosen by the king's counselors to replace him for the period, wherein he would be exposed to the danger of the bad omen.<sup>13</sup> The substitution, which was always suggested to the king by the chief *exorcist*, or a council of high-ranking scholars, was intended to deflect the repercussions of the portent away from the king and disburden them upon the surrogate, who, as the ephemeral regal replacement, was often bestowed with the paraphernalia of sovereignty (he was clad with the royal robe and was given a diadem). Immediately after his enthronement, the surrogate would take the evil omens in all their diverse expressions upon himself by reciting in front of Šamaš the evil portents (originally intended for the king), which had been written down for his (and his substitute queen). What is more, while the rightful sovereign was required to keep a low profile (and was often addressed as *ikkāru* "farmer" by the corresponding scholars<sup>15</sup>), to relinquish his throne to the surrogate, and to stay in the palace, the surrogate king was allowed some liberties intended to emphasize his impersonation of the king during the extent of his pseudo-rule: he could be accompanied by a surrogate queen, permitted modest travel, and entertain a mini-court with some pomp. However, at no time did the surrogate hold any power of governance, which was exclusively exercised by the king. Nonetheless, the fact that over one-third of the substitute's entourage could consist of bodyguards (*ša qurbūti*),<sup>16</sup> it seems that, despite the illusory nature of his power, he was watched closely.<sup>17</sup> Once the danger had passed, the surrogate was put to death, or as it was called: *ana šimti-šu (alāku)* "to go to his fate," together with his short-lived consort.<sup>18</sup>

Before discussing the bearing of the "substitute king" ritual on Darius' story, with which it does not seem at first glance to share much common ground, the few and discrete attestations of its presence in Achaemenid Iran shall be briefly reviewed. Indeed, aside from the testimony of the Alexander historians as to the endurance of the "substitute king" rites in Mesopotamia dur-

ing the Macedonian invasion,<sup>19</sup> Herodotus also knows of a most intriguing and well-known episode pertaining to Xerxes' campaign in Greece. Herodotus reports that King Xerxes, having determined not to invade Hellas,<sup>20</sup> had on two consecutive nights a vision (ὄψις) wherein an apparition warned him of the dire personal consequences to the king were he to refrain from campaigning against Hellas.<sup>21</sup> In order to ascertain the divine origin of his dream, Xerxes ordered his uncle Artabanus to put on the sovereign's robe, take his seat upon the royal throne, and sleep on the king's own bed, to establish whether the same vision with the selfsame behest would also appear to Artabanus.

Although this episode does not represent a genuine instance of the "substitute king" ritual, numerous elements in it, such as (1) the occurrence of a life-threatening portent for the king; (2) the ephemeral bestowal of the insignia of regal power upon an individual; (3) for the latter to represent or substitute the king in order to experience the tenor of the king's dream/omen—all these elements undoubtedly point to a variation on the theme of the "substitute king" ritual.

Returning to this analysis, the Bisitun inscription neither reports any omen threatening Cambyses, nor of Gaumāta's substitution of the king. How then does the "substitute king" ritual relate to this plot? Again, Herodotus comes to the rescue. He narrates that Cambyses ordered the assassination of Bardiya, for he had a vision in which Bardiya had bereft him of his kingdom and had sat on his throne.<sup>22</sup>

#### Herodotus 3.64

Ἐνθαῦτα ἀκούσαντα Καμβύσεα τὸ Σμέρδιος οὐνομα ἔτυψε ἡ ἀληθείη τῶν τε λόγων καὶ τοῦ ἐνυπνίου· ὃς ἐδόκεε ἐν τῷ ὕπνῳ ἀπαγγεῖλαι τινά οἱ ὡς Σμέρδις ἰζόμενος ἐς τὸν βασιλῆιον θρόνον ψαύσειε τῇ κεφαλῇ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ. μαθὼν δὲ ὡς μάτην ἀπολωλεκῶς εἶπεν τὸν ἀδελφεόν ἀπέκλαιε Σμέρδιν.

"The truth of the words and of the dream struck Cambyses upon hearing the name of Smerdis; for he had seen in a dream a message announcing to him how Smerdis seated on the royal throne touched heaven with his head. And perceiving how he had killed his brother in vain, he wept loudly for Smerdis."

Thus, in Herodotus' narrative, Cambyses, in order to escape the fate portended in his vision,

seems to have tried to alter the omen itself by eliminating the source of the danger, namely, Bardiya. This is indeed different from the underlying principles guiding the substitute king ritual, wherein on account of the irrevocability of the omen, efforts are aimed at deflecting the evil fate away from the king and re-directing it towards another recipient, rather than countering the omen itself. In this context, a clue as to what could have constituted the underlying *a priori* assumption of Herodotus' story, evident and self-explanatory to his Iranian and Mesopotamian audience, but requiring elaboration when addressing a Greek audience, is provided by Ctesias.

Ctesias, whose account may have reflected stories and beliefs current at the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes II, also reports on Gaumāta's "usurpation," but unlike Herodotus and Trogus/Justin he merely knows of one magus-usurper by the name of Sphendadatēs, who, having been in the past ill-treated by Prince Bardiya, called Tanyoxarkēs in Ctesias' account, exacted revenge upon the latter by denouncing him as a plotter against the king:

Ctesias F13.11

Μάγος δέ τις Σφενδαδάτης ὄνομα ἀμαρτήσας καὶ μαστιγωθείς ὑπὸ Τανυοξάρκου ἀφικνεῖται πρὸς Καμβύσῃν ἐνδιαβάλλων τὸν ἀδελφὸν Τανυοξάρκην ὡς ἐπιβουλεύοντα αὐτῷ.<sup>23</sup>

"A magus called Sphendadatēs, who had committed a wrong and had been whipped by Tanyoxarkēs, came to Cambyses and accused his brother Tanyoxarkēs of conspiring against him."

What is more, this magus, who also happened to resemble Prince Tanyoxarkēs, devised a plan for Cambyses on how to assassinate his suspect bother, so that the crime might remain undiscovered:

Ctesias F13.12

ὁ γάρ τοι μάγος βουλῆς τῷ βασιλεῖ κοινωνῶν βουλεύει τοιοῦτον· ὅμοιος ἦν αὐτὸς ὁ μάγος κάρτα τῷ Τανυοξάρκῃ· βουλεύει τοιγαροῦν αὐτὸν μὲν ἐν τῷ φανερῷ ὡς δῆθεν ἀδελφοῦ βασιλέως κατειπόντα τὴν κεφαλὴν προστάξει ἀποτμηθῆναι ἐν δὲ τῷ κρυπτῷ ἀναιρεθῆναι Τανυοξάρκην καὶ τὴν ἐκείνου στολὴν ἀμφιασθῆναι τὸν μάγον ὥστε καὶ τῷ ἀμφιάσματι νομίζεσθαι Τανυοξάρκην.<sup>24</sup>

"The magus in concert with the king [= Cambyses] devised the following plan. This magus re-

sembled Tanyoxarkēs very closely. For that very reason, he proposes that the order to cut off his (the magus') head for having denounced the king's brother be given publicly, but (in reality) that Tanyoxarkēs be killed in secret, and the magus be clad in that person's robe, so that he would be considered to be Tanyoxarkēs on account of the garment."

Integrating this information, the relevance of the substitute king ritual for Darius' literary subterfuge, which was intended to mask the reality of his own coup d'état against Bardiya and Gaumāta, becomes apparent. In Darius' account it is presumed that Cambyses, threatened by an omen predicting the loss of his sovereignty to his brother, ordered his assassination and replaced him with a substitute, who by assuming power indeed fulfilled the promise of the omen. Thus, in our context, far from deflecting the omen from himself, Cambyses is accused of countering it by replacing the hostile Bardiya with a friendly substitute, a substitute who, following the death of Cambyses, became sole ruler of the Persian empire.

#### 4. Evil Brothers and Evildoers in Sasanian Inscriptions and in Iranian Epic Traditions

Now let us turn to the problem of the "two brothers." What could have triggered the identification of "two associates" with "two brothers" in the presumed oral composition of the Gaumāta story, which was then, as one suspects, captured by Herodotus, Pompeius' sources, and Hellanicus of Lesbos?<sup>25</sup>

Intriguingly, one finds in the inscription of the Sasanian king Narseh at Paikuli, which belongs to the late third and early fourth centuries C.E., and in the Iranian epic literature many attestations of two *evildoers* or *evil brothers* who stand accused of treachery and treason against their rightful ruler or hero. Although the inscription of Paikuli was composed over 900 years later than the events under investigation, and the epic material belongs to the early New Persian literary corpus, they may well contain older epic material, on which the oral composition of the Bisitun could have drawn under Darius' rule. In

the following these valuable comparanda will be discussed briefly.

The inscription of Narseh at Paikuli (NPi) recounts the events that led to the accession of Narseh, the youngest son of Šābuhr I and king of Armenia. According to NPi, following the death of the King of Kings Warahrān II, a certain Wahnām, son of Tatus, bestowed the crown upon Warahrān, king of Sakas and son of the defunct king Warahrān II, without Narseh or the high nobility having been consulted on the matter of succession. This perceived “usurpation” by Wahnām, son of Tatus, would eventually lead to a full-fledged conspiracy involving Narseh and large segments of the nobility, a military confrontation with the forces of Wahnām and Warahrān, the capture and execution of the former, the abduction of the latter, and the enthronement of Narseh.<sup>26</sup>

NPi, A8,02—A15,02

*ud Wahnām ī Tatusān (pad) xwēš drōzanīh ud (pušt) ī Ahriman ud dēwān [pad Sagān šāh sar] dēhēm bandēd ud pad ān xīr nē amā (āfrāh) kunēd ud (nē) [. . .] wispuhrān āfrāh [kunēd ud wispuhrān] ud wuzurgān ud āzādān ud Pārsān ud Pahlawān \*ābursīd [hēnd kū an Wahnām ī Tatusān Warahrān] ī Sagān šāh dēhēm sar (bandēm) [u-m pad] \*padixšar kāmīst [abar] ēstādan.<sup>27</sup>*

“and Wahnām, son of Tatus, [through] his own falsehood and [with the help] of Ahriman and the devils, attached the diadem [to the head of Warahrān, king of Sakas]. And he did not (inform) Us about that matter, nor [did he] inform the Princes, [and later? the princes], grandees, nobles, and Persians and Parthians were informed [that: I, Wahnām, son of Tatus have] attached the diadem to the head of [Warahrān] king of Sakas; [and I] wish to establish [him/myself in] an exalted position[.]”

The general tenor of the Paikuli inscription displays striking parallels with that of Darius at Bisitun.<sup>28</sup> This is evident in particular in the role played by the *duo* Wahnām and Warahrān in the perceived “usurpation” of the royal power, that is, the distribution of their functions, with Wahnām being the *crown-bestower*, and Prince Warahrān the *puppet-king*—this closely matches the functions of Patizeithēs and Smerdis.

In the Iranian epic “Book of the Kings,” the *Šāhnāme*, which is the repository of the Iranian

oral epic tradition and was put into writing toward the end of the first millennium, the campaign of one of the foremost king-heroes of the Iranian epic tradition *Fereydōn* (*Frēdōn*), that is, the Avestan *Θraētaona-*, against the archetypal evil, the personified giant dragon of the past *Aži Dahāka*,<sup>29</sup> now called *Zahāk*, is evoked. In his successful campaign against *Zahāk*, *Fereydōn* almost suffers annihilation from unexpected quarters: two (older) brothers of his, possibly twin brothers (*dō farrox hamāl*) called *Katāyōn* and *Barmāye*—both already known to us from their brief mention in the *Bundahišn* as *Kadāyōn* and *Barmāyōn*<sup>30</sup>—who erupt into the story, envious of his fortune, and in secret desiring his rule, design his demise through treachery; needless to say that their attempt is foiled by divine intervention:

Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Šāhnāme* 1.253–54  
*barādar dō būd-aš dō farrox hamāl*  
*az-o har dō āzāde mehtar be sāl*

*yekī būd az ēšan Katāyōn-aš nām*  
*degar nām Barmāye-ye šādkām*

“He [*Fereydōn*] had two brothers, blessed twin brothers,  
the two highborn ones were older than him in years.

One of them was called *Katāyōn*,  
and the name of the other (was) the gay  
*Barmāye*.”

Khaleghi-Motlagh, *Šāhnāme* 1.278–90  
*Barādar-aš har dō barō xāstand*  
*tabah-kardan-aš rā biyārāstand*

*be pāyān-e kōh šāh xofte be nāz*  
*šode yek zamān az šab-e dēryāz*

*yekī sang būd az bar-e borz kōh*  
*barādar-aš har dō nehān az gorōh*

*davidand bar kōh o kandand sang*  
*bedān tā bekōbad sar-aš bē-derang*

*vo-z-ān kōh ʔaltān ān forō-gāstand*  
*mar-ān xofte rā košte pendāstand*

*be farmān-e yazdān sar-e xofte-mard*  
*xorōšīdan-e sang bidār kard*

*be afsōn hamān sang bar jāy-e x<sup>v</sup>ēš  
bebast o naʾjonbīd ān sang bēš*

"The two brothers raised an eyebrow,  
and planed for his demise.

The king was peacefully asleep in the mountain's foothills,  
some time had passed from the long night.

There was a stone on top of that tall mountain,  
his two brothers moved away in secret from the group,

they ran towards the mountain and detached the stone,  
so that it may crush his (Fereydōn's) head at once,

rolling it, they threw it down from that mountain (top),  
they were (already) deeming the sleeping one killed,

(but) by order of the gods the clamor of the stone awakened the sleeping man.

Through magic he (Fereydōn) bound the stone in its place,  
And no further did that stone move."

Another example, which shows the prevalence of the theme of *two* evil brothers/evil-doers in the Iranian epic tradition, is provided by the medieval (tenth/eleventh century C.E.) Persian variation on the Alexander Romance, called the *Dārāb Nāme*, penned by Abu Ṭāher-e Ṭarsōsī. In this "Book of Dārāb," which refers to the last Achaemenid king Darius III, who, having been defeated by Alexander the Great, was eventually murdered by his closest retinue, Dārāb's murderers are depicted as two brothers, called *Māhyār* and *Ĵānōsyār*.<sup>31</sup> Having killed the king for personal gain, and in the hope of preserving their status and finding riches, they kill Dārāb, but as punishment for their actions for their actions, they are put to death by a repentant Alexander, who then becomes Darius' avenger:

Dārāb Nāmē, 1, 461<sup>32</sup>

"It thus reported that Dārāb had two magnates (at his service), one was called *Māhyār*, and the other *Ĵānōsyār* (*dō amīr būdand mar Dārāb rā*

*yekī Māhyār nām būd o yekī rā Ĵānōsyār*). And these two had been accused by Dārāb (of some crime). Both had been thinking that: 'we ought to kill Dārāb.' The one, whose name was *Māhyār*, said: 'we shall expect King Alexander to elevate our condition and increase our rank.' They sent someone to report these words to Alexander. The king (= Alexander) gave them hope and said that if they were able to complete this task, 'I would give them treasures and treasuries, and each single day I would fulfil seventy of their wishes.' He gave a precious stone to that person, and sent him away."

## 5. The Twin Brothers in Creation Myths

Having briefly touched upon the epic material, the question that remains is the origin of the negative image of two evildoers/brothers in Iran. A glance at the creation myths in Iran may account for its emergence. Among the variants of the ancient Iranian creation myths, one particular feature is constant: the absolute dualism that divides the cosmos, the world of thought and the material world, into two.<sup>33</sup> One half is the realm of the Good Spirit, emanating from Ahura Mazdā (or Ōhrmazd); and the other that of the Evil Spirit, Angra Manyu (or Ahriman), and his counter-creation. Were one to consider the later Sasanian Zoroastrian tradition (such as the *Bundahišn* and the *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*) as representing the standard, orthodox interpretation of cosmogony in Mazdaism, these two principles are from pre-existent eternity;<sup>34</sup> after a period of mixture ending after 9,000 years, they would separate again, with the triumph of the good creation over the evil spirit during the time of regeneration.

Although this perception of the separation of opposite principles maintained the notion of Ōhrmazd's essential purity, as he was not responsible for begetting the Evil Spirit, it certainly must have been perceived as a limitation to Ōhrmazd's omnipotence at some point in the long journey of Zoroastrian thought.

It therefore does not come as a surprise that attempts were made at reconciling the postulate of Ōhrmazd's omnipotence with the notion of his untainted purity in the later Sasanian theological tradition, as partially known to us through Syriac, Armenian, and Muslim sources. It is within

this context that one first hears of two alternate solutions. The first explains the emergence of the Evil Spirit as the result of a moment of self-doubt by the supreme divinity, or as that of an intellectual exercise by Ōhrmazd imagining himself an opponent.<sup>35</sup> A second solution, which represents a more substantial change, presupposes the existence of an exalted third entity called Zurwān, or Time, from whom his twin sons Ōhrmazd and Ahriman were brought into existence, judging from Late Antique Armenian and Syriac sources.<sup>36</sup> This particular myth of creation, which, as reflected in *Dēnkard*, was considered heretical in late Sasanian times,<sup>37</sup> and to which the dualist Manichaeans also objected,<sup>38</sup> might have been already attested in the early fourth century B.C.E., if one were to believe a notice attributed to Eudemus of Rhodes. Indeed, Damascius in a passage of his *dubitaciones et solutiones*,<sup>39</sup> in the early sixth century C.E., while referring to the authority of Eudemus, reports that from among the “magi and all of the Iranian race” (μάγοι καὶ πᾶν τὸ ἄρειον γένος), some call “the whole of that which is intelligible and unified” (τὸ νοητὸν ἅπαν καὶ τὸ ἡνωμένον) either Time (Χρόνος) or Place (Τόπος), from which a “good god and an evil demon have separated” (ἐξ οὗ διακριθῆναι ἢ θεὸν ἀγαθὸν καὶ δαίμονα κακόν); these are then called Ὀρομάσδης and Ἀρειμάνιος. What is more, in a much debated passage of the Avestan *Gāthās* (Yasna 30.3), known as the *Strophe of the Twin Sleeps*, which belongs to the most antique substratum of Old Iranian composition, the two principles are possibly shown to be embryonic Twins (*yamā xʷafənanā*) as Prods Oktor Skjærvø has demonstrated.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, despite a well-established dominant tendency during the Sasanian empire to impose a myth of creation, in which the two principles are separate from pre-existent time, there seems to be evidence for presuming the simultaneous acceptance of an alternate myth, wherein these same principles were brothers or twins, either under the guise of Zurvanism in Late Antiquity, or in a more arcane antiquity as embryonic twins. Therefore, one may further wonder whether a similar opposition to the myth of creation, in which the opposite principles are interlaced, as Eudemus’ note would suggest, may have already existed prior to the Sasanians, possibly under the Achaemenids.

If one were indeed to posit such a possibility, then the vilification of the two brothers in Iranian

history and epic could be explained. The rejection of a myth of creation, wherein the Good and Evil Spirits could have shared the same primordial essence as twins may have brought in its wake the very notion of twins into disgrace, with the result that they were exclusively associated with the Evil Spirit, and viewed as representative of a theological thrust wholly at variance with one championing their distinct natures.

In recapitulation, one may say that the vilification of the two brothers in ancient Iranian history and epic traditions has led us to investigate the diverse conceptions of creation myths in ancient Iran. Having established that the authoritative theological treatises of the Sasanian era reject any relation between the two opposite principles, it has been suggested here that the disgrace of the two brothers might have been related to a similar theological posture against the coessentiality of the two principles in earlier times, which would have tilted the very notion of the twin brothers into the evil’s camp.

## Conclusion

In order to explain how the story of Darius could have found acceptance among his fellow Persians, one needs to assume that they were acquainted with certain practices and myths, which would have been self-evident to the audience of the time. Among these practices and myths, the ritual of the substitute king and the theme of the two evil brothers can provide tools with which to tackle the enigma of Darius’ accession, but, as our proposition is grounded upon the existence of many *a priori* assumptions that cannot be proved or disproved from our empirical knowledge, the reality of Darius’ accession remains a matter of informed speculation.

## Notes

1. For a survey of recent scholarship, see Briant 2000; idem 2002, pp. 97–138; among more pertinent works, see Dandamaev 1976; idem 1989, pp. 83–135; Balcer 1987; Zawadski 1994, pp. 127–45; Demandt 1996, pp. 1–14. Still indispensable Wiesehöfer 1978; and Bickerman and Tadmor 1978, pp. 238–61. For the inscription of King Narseh at Paikuli, I have followed the translations of Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 3:2; the translations of all other texts are mine.



2. DB I, ll. 28–43, 48–61.
3. Herodotus 3.61; 3.79. For Herodotus' text, see Rosén 1987–1997.
4. Justin 1.9.4–23.
5. So already Marquart 1905, pp. 145–46; and Wiesehöfer 1978, pp. 49–50.
6. Herodotus 3.61.
7. Herodotus 3.63.
8. On names ending in *°upasta-* in Iranian onomastica, such as *\*Miθra-upasta-* “who has the support of Miθra,” see Schmitt 2000, pp. 103, 114; more recently Stolper 2006, p. 250; and Tavernier 2007, p. 252, no. 4.2.1121.
9. Compare Marquart 1905, pp. 145–46: “Auch der Gewährsmann des Pompeius Trogus hat mehrere Quellen herangezogen, darunter eine sehr alte, welche noch den wahren Namen des Magiers, Gometes = Gaumāta, kennt—schon Dionysios von Milet wusste ihn nicht mehr—, während eine andere, ohne Zweifel bedeutend jüngere, für denselben einen neuen Namen Oropastes = ap. *\*Ahura-upastāh* “den Ahura zum Beistand habend” erfand, der in der That für einen Magier vorzüglich passte. Trogus Gewährsmann hat diese beiden Versionen nach dem Vorbilde Herodots gleichfalls in der Weise auszugleichen gesucht, dass er den Oropastes, der dem ermordeten Mergis überaus ähnlich war, von seinem Bruder Gometes, einem der Freunde des Kambyzes, welcher die Ermordung des Mergis ausgeführt hatte . . . auf den Thron erhoben werden lässt.”
10. Briant 2002, pp. 518–24, 777–80.
11. On the substitute king ritual in Mesopotamia, see Bottéro 1978, pp. 2–24; idem 1992, pp. 138–55; Parpola 1983, pp. xxii–xxxii; more recently, see Touraïx 2001, pp. 101–8; Huber 2005a, pp. 339–97; and Huber 2005b, pp. 156–66.
12. Occurs in plural as *dābibānu* (with the particularizing suffix *-ān-*) in the meaning of “plotter(s)” to *dabābu* “talk; plot”; see Parpola 1993, no. 240 rev. 21–25 (= pp. 191–92); and Parpola 1983, p. 179 for a discussion of *dābibu/-ānu*; also Huber 2005a, pp. 345–46, n. 16.
13. Parpola 1983, p. xxiv.
14. Parpola 1983, p. xxiv; Bottéro 1992, p. 147; and Parpola 1993, no. 2 obv. 1–13 (= p. 4): “[t]o the ‘farmer,’ my lord: your servant Nabû-zeru-lešir . . . I wrote down whatever signs there were, be they celestial, terrestrial, or of malformed births, and had them recited in front of Šamaš, one after the other. They [the substitute king and queen] were treated with wine, washed with water, and anointed with oil; I had those birds cooked and made them eat them. The substitute king of the land of Akkad took the signs on himself [emphasis mine];” no. 351 obv. 11–14 (= p. 287): “I made him [= substitute] recite the omen litanies before Šamaš; he took all the celestial and terrestrial portents on himself, and ruled all the country.”
15. Bottéro 1992, p. 149.
16. Parpola 1983, p. xxv; also Huber 2005b, p. 157, n. 84.
17. Parpola 1983, p. xxiv.
18. Parpola 1993, no. 220 rev. 2–3 (= p. 174); no. 221 obv. 8–9 (= p. 174); no. 352 obv. 12–13 (= p. 288).
19. More recently Abramenko 2000, pp. 361–78; and Huber 2005a, pp. 368–80.
20. Herodotus 7.12–17.
21. On this episode, see more recently Huber 2005a, pp. 357–62; already Germain 1956, p. 306, had fittingly interpreted this passage: “[l]’interprétation est simple. Quand Xerxès remet à son oncle les vêtements royaux, l’intrônise, enfin le met à sa place dans son propre lit, il l’élève symboliquement à la nature royale (plutôt qu’aux pouvoirs royaux au sens politique du mot). Pour la durée de la nuit, en face de cet être inquiétant, le roi désormais c’est Artabanos, qui sera exposé aux mêmes objurgations et, le cas échéant, aux mêmes dangers. Rien n’est plus logique, dès l’instant que l’on a reconnu un rite de substitution, qui identifie Artabanos et le roi.” Compare also Bichler 1985, pp. 140–45, who sees in this episode, as well as in other instances of the so-called *Reichsträume*, narratives, which owe their existence to the creative mind of Herodotus, and hence fully subscribe both in structure and content to Greek thought: “[d]ie ganze Geschichte ist griechisch, sie wohl eine Schöpfung Herodots selbst. Zu sehr ist sie seiner Gedankenwelt verpflichtet, zu sehr von Redeszenen und Details beherrscht, die seine gestaltende Hand verraten. Besonders schwer wiegt die enge Verbundenheit von Xerxes’ Traumerprobung mit der Orakelerprobung des Aristodikos und mit anderen Geschichten in seinem Werk.” See also Evans 1961, pp. 109–11.
22. Herodotus 3.64–65.
23. For recent editions and translations of Ctesias’ fragments, see Lenfant 2004; Stronk 2010; Llewellyn-Jones and Robson 2010. For the present passage, see Lenfant 2004, p. 114; and Stronk 2010, p. 323–24.
24. Lenfant 2004, p. 118; and Stronk 2010, p. 324.
25. A later scholia attributed to Hellanicus of Lesbos, while commenting on Aeschylus’ *Persians*, mentions Cambyzes’ two brothers, which is surely nothing but the reflection of our two associates: Κύρου υἱὸς Καμβύσης· ἀδελφοὶ δὲ κατὰ Ἑλλάνικον Μάρφης Μέρφης “Cyrus’ son Cambyzes had, according to Hellanicus, two brothers: Maraphis and Merphis.” See Ambaglio 1980, p. 83, no. 110; also Pérez 1991, p. 169, no. 180.
26. For the critical edition of the Paikuli, see Humbach and Skjærvø 1978–1983.
27. For the reconstruction of this passage, see Humbach and Skjærvø 1983, 3:2, pp. 28–29.
28. See Mori 1995.
29. On *Aži Dahāka*, see now the pertinent study of Skjærvø 2008, pp. 533–49.

30. Bundahišn 35.9–10: “*ān 1000 sāl Dahāg duš-pādixšāyih būd. Az Aspīyān ī Purr-gāw Frēdōn zād kē kēn jam xwāst. aniz fraزند Barmāyōn ud Kadāyōn. Frēdōn az awēšān purr-xwarrahtar būd*” “those thyousand years belonged to the evil-rule of Dahāg. To Aspīyān Purr-gāw Frēdōn was born, who sought to avenge Jam; also the other children [of Aspīyān] were *Barmāyōn* and *Kadāyōn*. Frēdōn was bestowed with more (royal) glory than them.” For a critical edition of the Bundahišn, see now Pakzad 2005.

31. See Gaillard 2005, pp. 9–17, 149.

32. Šafā 1965 [A.P. 1344], vol. 1, p. 461.33.

33. On this topic, see authoritatively Shaked 1994, pp. 13–26.

34. Shaked 1994, p. 15.

35. For the testimony of Šahrestānī, see Gimaret and Monnot, vol. 1, p. 636: “La cause occasionnelle de la création d’Ahriman, c’est que, disent-ils, yazdān pensa en lui-même: ‘si je venais à avoir un antagoniste, comment serait-il?’ Cette pensée était mauvaise, en discordance à la nature de la Lumière.” For Mas’ūdī, see Zaehner 1955, p. 443.

36. Zaehner 1955, pp. 419–28; de Jong 1997, pp. 63–64, 330–38.

37. Dēnkard 9.30.4: *az gōwišn ī Zarduxšt abar drāyīdan ī Arš dēw ō mardōmān: Ōhrmazd ud Ahrimen dō brād ī pad ēk aškom būd hēnd*, “from the saying of Zoroaster about the howling of the demon Arš to the people: ‘Ohrmazd and Ahrimen were two brothers in one womb.’” See Madan 1911, 2, 829, ll. 1–4.

38. See Zaehner 1955, p. 431.

39. For the passage, see Westerink and Combès 1991, 125bis; and Clemen 1920, 95.

40. Skjærvø, chapter 8.4, forthcoming.

Bickerman and  
Tadmor 1978

Bichler 1985

Bottéro 1978

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